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Idaho Conservation League

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RE: Idaho Conservation League scoping comments on the Middle Fork Weiser Landscape Restoration Project

Dear Keith,

Thank you for considering our comments on the Middle Fork Weiser Project. Since 1973, the Idaho Conservation League has worked to protect Idaho's clean water, wilderness, and quality of life. As Idaho's largest state-based conservation organization, we represent over 25,000 supporters who have a deep personal interest in ensuring that vegetation management projects integrate sound ecological restoration measures.

We have also participated in the past as a member of the Payette Forest Coalition and have consistently advocated for an increase in the scope and scale of restoration projects within the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) area. Forest Collaboratives like the PFC have proven to be successful ventures across Idaho for increasing the quality of Forest Service proposals, restoring forest and watershed conditions, and improving the dialogue among a wide variety of stakeholders. However, since we have not been able to participate in collaborative discussions or recommendations for this specific project, we are participating through the normal NEPA process. As we have the opportunities to reengage with the PFC, we are happy to discuss our comments with the larger group. Our goal is to see a successful project that balances forest health, watershed, wildlife and community goals.

At the same time, we recognize that some of the concepts and suggestions in this comment letter may cover ground that the collaborative group has already covered. It is not our intent to rehash previous discussions, however we do feel that several issues are of critical importance that deserve to be fully illuminated through the EIS, in an effort to demonstrate full compliance with NEPA, the CFLR Act, the Forest Plan, and other direction.

Economic feasibility is important, but cannot occur at the expense of the ecological integrity or restoration. The primary purpose of the project is to improve wildlife habitat, not maximize revenue. All areas selected for restoration in the proposal must meet and be consistent with the Forest Plan and the Wildlife Conservation Strategy Appendix A and the Aquatic Conservation Strategy. In other wildlife restoration-focused projects, when there have been unresolved conflicts between wildlife habitat improvement efforts and financial return, the solution has been to fund the project through grants instead of potentially deleterious resource extraction.

Because one of the goals is to reduce canopy closure and alter the amount and configuration of currently denser forest habitat across a large portion of the total forested area within the analysis boundary, we must be certain that we maintain sufficient dense forest areas in the amount and configuration necessary to maintain habitat and connectivity for certain terrestrial and aquatic species that depend on dense forest habitat and edge habitat for meeting their life requisites and for maintaining habitat connectivity for species movements through the entire analysis area. Specifically, we have concerns about how habitat for lynx is being managed and wish to ensure that forest restoration efforts are consistent with maintaining lynx habitat.

The goal of protecting Legacy Trees and maximizing retention of large diameter trees is outlined in the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act; *Sec. 4003(D) fully maintains, or contributes toward the restoration of, the structure and composition of old growth stands according to the pre-fire suppression old growth conditions characteristic of the forest type, taking into account the contribution of the stand to landscape fire adaptation and watershed health and retaining the large trees contributing to old growth structure; (E) would carry out any forest restoration treatments that reduce hazardous fuels by-- (i) focusing on small diameter trees, thinning, strategic fuel breaks, and fire use to modify fire behavior, as measured by the projected reduction of uncharacteristically severe wildfire effects for the forest type*

(such as adverse soil impacts, tree mortality or other impacts); and (ii) maximizing the retention of large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote fire-resilient stands.

The Forest Service's purpose for this project promotes an increase in large tree class size, canopy cover and in the number of early seral species. With the goals clearly outlined, it is imperative to find the best means of protecting Legacy Trees and maximizing the retention of large diameter trees.

While Ponderosa pine, western larch and "legacy-like Douglas fir" are stated as the preferred species for retention, grand fir can also occur in the project area with old growth/legacy tree/large tree characteristics. Because the mature grand fir component is underrepresented across the majority of the area, the majority of all particularly large native trees, regardless of species, need to be protected for both wildlife and as part of the forest's natural heritage. In addition, the Forest Plan and Wildlife Conservation Strategy highlight the value of these mature trees for wildlife.

We are also concerned about the removal of snags by firewood cutters and recommend design features that ensure that large snags important for wildlife will not be cut.

The issue of the best way to protect Legacy Trees and the retention of large diameter trees has been raised in several Payette Forest Coalition meetings. On a September 24th PFC field trip in 2013, a location in harvest unit 84 was chosen to highlight how the current marking procedures protect Legacy Tree and other large diameter ponderosa pines. During the discussion it was noted that a Legacy Tree was marked for removal. The Forest Service marking crew leader was there and noted that it was a mistake made by a less experienced crewmember. This highlights the concern that handing this guideline to a contractor's marking crew with varied levels of experience might produce less than desired results for Legacy Tree protection. After reviewing the Legacy Tree guideline it is clear that it is a well written, well thought out document, however, implementation of the guidelines can be confusing and subjective, leaving open the possibility that the Forest may not meet their desired objectives.

http://0101.nccdn.net/1_5/31b/190/17d/LegacyTreeGuidelinesComprss.pdf

Proposed Idea for Legacy Tree and large diameter tree retention:

While we recognize that this concept was considered by the PFC and alternative approaches to protect and promote legacy trees was arrived at by the collaborative, we still feel that this approach should at least be considered by the Forest as an alternative approach to achieve the purpose of “maintaining and promoting large trees” and warrants consideration in the EIS.

As originally recommended by the Nez Perce Tribe, we encourage the Forest to develop clear guidance with regards to limitations on cutting for trees at an established diameter at breast height (DBH) (with appropriate exceptions for safety and operability issues) for individual stands within this project. This would ensure that there are easy to implement, transparent, quantifiable metrics to protect Legacy trees and the “largest of the large” diameter trees in accordance with the written goals of this project. An established DBH would remove ambiguity from large diameter tree harvest. This DBH could be species specific and calculated using stand data. A suggestion would be to graph stand DBH data to produce a bell shaped curve. Find a logical place on the curve where the majority of Legacy tree and the “largest of the large” diameter trees fall, and establish a DBH for retention. This approach may be able to get down to the unit level should the data be available.

While we do not necessarily dispute that the Marking Guidelines may achieve the purpose and need for the project, we are concerned that they may not “maximize retention of large diameter trees.” After all, if the marking guide still results in the removal of the largest diameter grand fir and Douglas fir, if species preference is given to ponderosa pine and larch to meet the desired residual basal area range, is the Forest truly maximizing retention? We understand that the Forest is promoting early seral species, however, we encourage consideration of specific and measurable protections for the “largest of the large” grand and Douglas fir trees. If the Forest is trying to promote historic conditions, these larger older trees represent just that. Legacy trees with mistletoe (regardless of mistletoe rating) should be protected using this same DBH for wildlife habitat.

We remain committed to exploring alternative design features and/or marking guidelines based on a diameter limit that might offer additional flexibility in limited circumstances. Such an approach could give foresters the flexibility they need and provide protections for old growth-dependent species the certainty that sufficient mature tree habitat will be preserved. For example, the Soda Bear Project on the Malheur National Forest started with a prescription that preserved all trees with old growth

characteristics and all trees 21” dbh and greater. They then incorporated a design feature that allowed for tree removal of trees greater than 21” if they were determined to be less than 150 years old. They also added a design feature to address the circumstance when a large diameter tree is competing with an even larger, more desirable tree and poses a risk to the larger tree. From the center of the larger, more desirable tree, the Forest Service established a circle equivalent to two times the diameter of the drip line. Should a less desirable tree occur within this area, it could be considered for removal. We

These additional protections of Legacy Trees and large diameter trees will highlight the Forest’s commitment to ensuring to fully meeting the goals of this project and the CFLRA.

We understand that there are some who feel that the protection of Legacy Trees and large diameter trees may be a social issue and not on ecological issue. However, published research has shown that Legacy Trees provide important habitat elements for many species of wildlife and have a higher level of diversity and richness than control trees (Mazurek 2003).

<http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/4251/mazurek2.pdf>

Legacy Trees have survived stand replacing natural disturbances and represent some of the best genetics for future seed source. It is in the Forest’s best interest to fully address this topic in the DEIS.

In addition, more information is needed on what constitutes restoration in mixed conifer types at higher elevations. While there is widespread agreement about silvicultural prescriptions for restoring dry site ponderosa pine stands, there is far less agreement about mixed conifer types at higher elevations that may not have missed one or more fire cycles and are functioning within Condition Classes I or II:

There are no clear guidelines for increasing the resilience of these forest types – unlike for forests adapted to high-frequency, low- to moderate-severity fire regimes – other than minimizing additional stresses from excessive grazing, recreation and salvage logging.

See link here: [Managing Forests and Fires in Changing Climates, Science, Vol. 342.](#)

Furthermore, these areas can serve as important hiding cover for elk and provide important habitat for lynx, pileated woodpeckers, goshawk, fisher and other wildlife. These areas may also contain legacy-

type trees. Projects in these areas have been successfully challenged over potential impacts to old-growth and old-growth reliant species.

The Idaho Conservation League is willing to consider treatments in mixed conifer, mixed severity-disturbance forest types if the Forest Service can present a compelling need, craft ecologically-based restoration goals based on potential vegetation types, and develop sufficient design features to address wildlife concerns. While it may be difficult to point to specific departures within a specific stand, we recognize the need to look across the larger landscape at the overall percentages of different forest types and stages of succession. We could be open to an approach that seeks to rebalance the percentage of forest types based on historic and predicted conditions. To that end, please find attached to these comments, several research papers addressing the ecology of mixed severity fire regimes (Perry et al, 2011, and North et al 2009), applicable guidelines (Franklin and Johnson, 2011 and Franklin and Johnson, 2011) associated with their restoration. We encourage you to review some of the applicable recommendations with regards to restoration of the mixed severity fire regimes found in the Middle Fork Weiser project area.

A key component of any restoration activity is to address watershed health issues, particularly culverts, road densities, and road locations. We appreciate that the project seeks to address some of these concerns through the replacement of culverts, decommissioning of roads, and improvements to recreation facilities within Riparian Conservation Areas (RCAs). To meet the watershed improvement goals, we encourage you to seek to improve watershed ratings to Functioning Acceptably or, at a minimum, Functioning At Risk. In addition to utilizing silvicultural prescriptions to seek to meet watershed improvement goals, these prescriptions should also be designed these areas need to address the previously mentioned issues of legacy trees, hiding cover for elk, and habitat for lynx and other wildlife.

Finally, attached below are some additional considerations that we encourage you to evaluate as you develop alternatives and the DEIS.

Once again we thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on this project. Please send us any subsequent documents for this project. We look forward to continuing to work with the Council Ranger District on this project and others in the future.

Sincerely,



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Idaho Conservation League scoping comments on the Middle Fork Weiser Landscape Restoration proposal

Wildlife

Information should be included describing the potential impacts to Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive (TE&S) and Management Indicator Species (MIS) in the project area. If the project area provides habitat for Lynx, TE&S or MIS Species, this information should be detailed. While we recognize the relatively modest size of the project, it should nonetheless be designed to have no effect on TE&S Species, and mitigation measures should be put in place in order to protect habitat from disturbance.

Regarding Goshawks, we encourage you to incorporate *Management Recommendations for the Northern Goshawk in the Southwestern United States* (Reynolds et al. 1992). Additionally, coarse woody debris should be maintained in accordance with the recommendations in *Managing Coarse Woody Debris in Forests of the Rocky Mountains* (Graham et al, 1994).

Noxious Weeds

We are particularly concerned with the spread of noxious weeds following the project, and encourage the proposal to require washing of all equipment brought onto the site and monitoring of the project area after the project has been completed, to evaluate the need for future weed reduction activities.

Roads

Previous management activities have resulted in excessive road densities throughout our National Forests. This density compromises the project area's ability to support wildlife and fish by increasing the potential for disturbance by humans, fragmenting habitat, promoting sedimentation in a municipal watershed, and encouraging OHV use. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Bull Trout Interim Conservation Guidance describes the following correlation between bull trout and road density:

Bull trout strongholds in the Interior Columbia River Basin showed a very strong negative correlation with road densities. Bull trout populations classified as 'depressed' had an average watershed road density of 1.4

mi/mi sq. and bull trout typically were absent at an average road density of 1.7 mi/mi. sq. (page 27, BTICG)

Please provide accurate road density information in the analysis for this project. The maps associated with the project should accurately depict all system and non-system roads in the project area. This will illustrate the intensity of past road construction and will serve to provide the public with a clear picture of the road situation in the area. The DEIS should clearly depict the actual situation on the ground and should provide road density information for watersheds and subwatersheds that will be affected by management activities.

At least one alternative should be developed that is based entirely off existing roads. We strongly encourage the Forest Service to decommission or relocate as many roads as possible within the project area.

Major impacts to soils, vegetation, and fish and wildlife would occur during road construction and the first year thereafter. Even if roads are obliterated (i.e. temporary and decommissioned roads), the negative impacts may persist for decades. Even the best obliteration does not immediately restore soil conditions or attendant effects on hydrology, vegetation and other resulting offsite effects. In fact, as currently practiced, road closures often do nothing to restore the disturbed conditions and sometimes exacerbate impacts over simple abandonment. The DEIS should clearly delineate the specific roads proposal, detailing which roads will be obliterated vs. those that will only have some level of obliteration, recontouring or culvert removal.

If temporary roads are considered, the Forest Service needs to analyze and disclose when temporary roads will regain their former productivity or state that this action represents an irreversible commitment of the soil resource.

Road closure is a contentious issue but is simply the best way to restore watersheds suffering from legacy problems. Permanently closing all non-essential roads will save money, protect water quality, protect wildlife, and safeguard threatened, endangered and sensitive species, and their habitat.

Proper road maintenance is critical if sediment is to be controlled. The environmental analysis should detail the long-term maintenance plan for all roads in the project area. When roads are removed, care must be taken to minimize sedimentation, manage noxious weeds, revegetate the area with native plants, and strictly enforce road closures. Any obliterated roads should be gated, signed, and patrolled to prevent incursions by OHVs. All culverts should be removed from obliterated or stored roads. Culverts that are not maintained may lead to blocked drainages and eventual blowouts. Additional mitigation measures are needed which guarantee no near-term net increases in soil disturbance or sedimentation in the watershed as a whole such as stream bank stabilization upstream and downstream of the site.

Coarse Wood Retention

To promote development and protection of soils, the project should also apply the recommendations from Graham et al (1994) regarding retention of coarse woody debris on the forest floor to ensure soil protection and development.

Role of fire in proposal

Recurring low-intensity fire plays a role in the ability for Ponderosa pine to outcompete less fire-resistant species such as Douglas-fir, subalpine fir and other species. We appreciate your consideration for the application of underburning in to promote natural processes.

Snags

A sufficient number of snags need to be left standing in each treatment area for cavity nesters until snags can be replaced by natural recruitment. Standing trees need to be overstocked to ensure sufficient habitat until new trees mature. Snags should be clumped rather than spaced evenly. Regional Snag Management Guidelines should be adhered to as part of this project and should be addressed in the EIS.